

The secret of Prune Hill's Prunes revealed

□ The local economy used to depend on the wrinkled fruit product

By Amy Trampush
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Many newcomers to the area have called in to the Two Rivers Heritage Museum asking "How did Prune Hill get its name?" Although remnants of life in the 1880s aren't around anymore, the name of Prune Hill stays. The area in Camas was used for — you guessed it — Prune orchards.

The first prune orchard was planted in Clark County near the present 26th and Main Streets in Vancouver by Arthur Hidden. He realized fruit from the Northwest would have to be dried in order to be shipped and came up with the prune as an ideal crop.

Word spread and the prune popularity came to the Camas-Washougal area in the late 1800s and was at one time a very lucrative business with entire families engaging in prune picking and drying.

"It provided employment for a lot of people," said Betty Ramsey, museum director. "They could earn \$30 to \$45 per person (per season) if a whole family was doing it. They would get a bonus if they stayed with one orchard the whole season. Some moved from orchard to orchard thinking they could extend the season."

Picking season lasted four to five weeks with the prunes being sent to canneries in Vancouver or sent to local dryers then shipped East. The pickers lived in tents during the weeks of harvesting and drying. Poles were used to shake the prunes from the trees before they were picked up off the ground and placed in wooden crates or boxes.

These prunes (mostly Italian variety) were important to the local economy until the mid 1900s when the depression hit and prune consumption was down. The California prune market had taken over.

Sixty million prunes were shipped in the 1920s from Clark County, so effective drying practices had to be established. Early dryers were wood-fired. People worked hauling and drying the prunes. The dryers were made of wood with open fires. It took many workers just to cut and supply the dryers with wood. Later they were fueled by oil. If the prunes were extra sweet the dryer tracks would be so sticky a tractor had to be hooked up to winches to pull the prunes through the dryers which was a 24-hour process.

Since these had a tendency to burn down, each year the prune dryers changed a little. The first dryers had the workers entering the dryer building but later dryers had windows on the outside which allowed the racks to be safely added or removed without contact. Forced air was used in the 1920s which meant the dryer required less time to dry the same number of prunes.

The last known prune dryer still standing is that of the Johnson family in Washougal. Grant

Johnson senior started the prune orchard on the land during prune popularity and also had a dairy business. Johnson also managed the Kerr Orchards. Helen Johnson, Grant Johnson junior's sister, said that her mother Pauline and her friend worked in the orchard together and were the only women to stoop for the entire day instead of crawling around on their knees. Johnson estimates that around 70 or more people were probably employed at the Johnson's from September to October.

"School would start late because of all the children working at the prune orchards," said Johnson. "I don't know about the child labor laws back then."

In 1907, orchards were on Prune Hill and throughout the Washougal area including Russell Orchard which burned down in 1922 and other area orchards including those of Billy Woods, Al Raven and Mr. Sheppard.

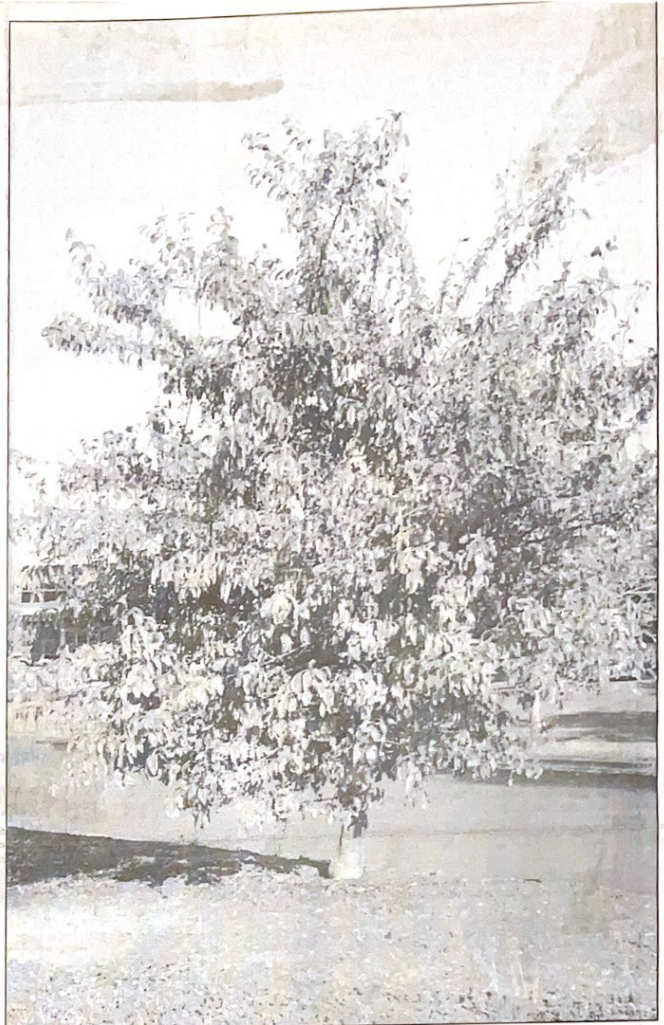
Orchard Hills Golf and Country Club in Washougal was once a prune orchard. A large prune dryer was located on Mount Norway and tons of prunes were shipped overseas until the end of the prune popularity and the beginning of World War I. At that time the German market which was buying many of the prunes was cut off. After the war the crop never recovered.

The Vancouver Independent Newspaper featured many articles during the 1800s about the Prune Hill area in Camas. In the June 7, 1893, edition they mentioned the area as a lovely destination.

"A ride from Vancouver to Prune Hill on the La-Camas road via Mill Plain will repay anyone for the trouble, so beautiful is the landscape the entire distance. At this season the country along this route shows to great advantage and is indeed a field for the artist. Then, too, it would do any one good to ride along and look upon the beautiful prune orchards. During the past season many new tracts have been planted with prune trees, which, with their green tops and regular lines contrasted against the clean black earth makes a pretty sight to behold. A large quantity of fruit will be gathered from the older trees on Mill Plain and Prune Hill this season. Before long this whole section will be one vast orchard separated by a fence here and there, or a contrast between the growing trees, according to their age," the article reads.

At around the same time period, Mr. C.S. West, who was manager of the mill at LaCamas, had an attractive and young prune orchard which was mentioned in the newspaper. Also of note were the orchards owned by the Skidmore, Gullette, Chapel, Noland, Boyer and that of Daniel's and Austin which overlooked the Columbia. They had 30 acres of bearing trees at that time. The largest was owned by H.C. Bostwick.

Although frost could have been an issue for prune farmers at the time, Prune Hill, despite the elevation, did not have a problem and it became a popular place to live. The Vancouver Independent noted that, "With fine orchards on every side it is any wonder that the residents of this locality feel



they have one of the favored localities in this productive county for a home."

In 1918, the Vancouver's first Royal Prune Harvest Festival was held by a group of volunteers officially known as the "Prunarians." The men who marched in a band and planned a parade were dubbed the Prunarians and wore matching suits. There was even a Prune Queen. A prune eating contest and a prune throwing contest were also popular events.

In 1929, an all-time high was reached for Clark County with a crop of 29,266 tons, which was never repeated again. Brown rot disease became a problem. The prunes grown in the area were not disease resistant but California raised a better and larger variety that were. The California farmers would also grow plums that the Northwest could not and did so year-round.

"They had a lack of knowledge and were mismanaged," said Ramsey about the local orchards. "There was an ice storm and disease."

The downfall of the Johnson Orchard, like

some of the others, was the aluminum plant nearby, said Helen Johnson. It emitted the chemical fluoride which could be absorbed by glass. When the prune crops went bad and scientists from Washington State University came to take samples they placed the prunes in glass jars which made the situation even worse to identify. The farmers from the area sued the Reynolds Aluminum plant and received a settlement for the loss of their prunes and also for their dairy cows who were reportedly growing hooves the size of skis, said Johnson. At that point the prune business had dried up.

A display chronicling the history of prunes in Clark County is now on display at the Two Rivers Heritage Museum until the end of November. Also of note is the museum's "Stitch in Time" exhibit of antique sewing materials. The museum is located at 1-16th St., Washougal and can be reached by phone at 835-8742.



An exhibit detailing the history of prunes in the Camas-Washougal area is now on display at the Two Rivers Heritage Museum. (Left) This screen and crate were items used in cultivating and drying the prunes. (Top) In 1991 the Camas-Washougal Historical Society donated prune trees to Sharp Microelectronics. The trees have done well in the area which used to be comprised of many prune trees. (Above) The last known prune dryer still standing is at the Johnson's estate in Washougal. The orchard employed many workers during September and October, the height of the season. Staff photos by Amy Trampush.